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Trout Unlimited group keeps fish habitat going for 36 years

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Volunteers with the Doc Fritchey Chapter of Trout Unlimited heave limestone into a doser so that trout can live in about 20 miles of Stony Creek, Pennsylvania's first designated scenic river.

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Every week for almost 36 years, a group of mostly older adults with a Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited chapter have performed an unheralded but vital task: keeping Stony Creek, the state's first designated scenic river, livable for fish.

They drive, bicycle, cross-country ski or snowshoe — whichever is necessary — 4 miles into Pennsylvania's second-largest roadless area, where they take turns hurling 160 shovelfuls of limestone gravel into two round, grate-covered holes in the ground.

From there, gravity and physics take over and do a remarkable thing. Water tainted with acid mine drainage from adjacent Rausch Creek, Stony Creek's primary tributary in northeast Lebanon County, is diverted by pipe into the limestone-filled wells. The churning limestone rocks both remove the acidity and send a plume of dissolved limestone downstream, raising the pH in Stony Creek.

The now-alkaline water counteracts the lingering mine pollution and enables trout and other aquatic life to survive in the gorgeous wild stream for about 20 miles, until it joins the Susquehanna River above Harrisburg. Without the regular dose of limestone, trout stocked in the stream — and now sometimes reproducing — would die within weeks.



Dennis Coffman of the Doc Fritchey Chapter of Trout Unlimited rakes leaves from the intake of pipe, part of two limestone dosers that enable trout to live in Pennsylvania's first state scenic river.

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The Swedish-design treatment system, originally installed by the Harrisburg area Trout Unlimited Doc Fritchey Chapter volunteers in 1986 and expanded in 2000, is believed to be the first limestone diversion well built in the U.S.

Several generations of volunteers with the conservation group have doggedly kept the effort going all these years. Some are gone, and many no longer even fish but do the work to give something back to their cherished pastime.

“I’m thankful that we can do something that makes a difference in the world,” said George Dobson, who showed up on a chilly December Sunday along with nine others and a black Labrador retriever for the maintenance ritual. “And this makes a difference, even if it is a small difference. You don’t do it because you have to, you do it because you should do it.”

Andy Link, a relative youngster at 39, is a graphic designer who cut his flyfishing teeth on Stony Creek. About four years ago he came across the limestone crew, learned of their mission and was hooked.

“The fact that there is no electricity or automation involved and everything works off of Mother Nature and gravity and human engineering is just kind of mind-blowing,” he said.

“You have to believe in what you’re doing,” said 78-year-old Rick Frazier, a retiree like most of the others in the group. “This helps all wildlife, not just trout.”



This manually operated limestone doser on Rausch Creek in Pennsylvania neutralizes acidity that lingers from past coal mining and would otherwise devastate fish habitat.

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Larry Herr, a farmer and octogenarian, is known as “the old man of the woods” to the others because he still roams these mountains daily. He describes himself as a “redneck environmentalist.” His great-grandmother used to be the postmaster of Cold Springs, a long-vanished mining boom town not far from the limestone wells.

Herr has helped with the weekly tending of the limestone “doser” for two decades “because it’s the right thing to do.”

Stony Creek is an extremely popular put-and-take trout stream in neighboring Dauphin County, where it exits Saint Anthony’s Wilderness on State Game Lands 211. But in the 1980s, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission noticed something disturbing in their stocking effort there: Trout were going belly-up within weeks of being stocked.

An analysis showed that Rausch Creek, two branches of which come together to become Stony Creek north of Fort Indiantown Gap, was carrying acid mine drainage, making it too acidic to support trout. The yellow-colored pollution emanated from long-abandoned deep coal mines of the early 1800s, as well as from waste coal piles on the surface and strip mines on a nearby ridge. Acid rain was once a factor, too, though federal air pollution laws have largely ended it.

A fish and wildlife research unit that included Penn State University, Pennsylvania's game and fish commissions and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed a possible solution. The Doc Fritchey Chapter eagerly signed on, obtaining all of the needed materials and providing free labor and equipment for the experimental limestone diversion well. And they volunteered to keep the doser running.



Members of the Doc Fritchey Chapter of Trout Unlimited in southcentral Pennsylvania that have tirelessly fed limestone dosers on a wilderness trout stream almost each week for almost 36 years.

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The results have been nothing short of amazing, they say. Not only do stocked trout survive unless hooked by an angler, but the improved water quality has allowed trout to hold over from one season to the next and reproduce in the wild. The first stop for the Doc Fritchey volunteers when they get to the diversion wells is to climb a narrow bridge over Rausch Creek and look for small, wild brook trout.

“When you look down off the bridge and see the brookies, it’s like, whoa, we’re doing something here,” 74-year-old Joe Notarangelo said.

“Stony Creek was dead. Nothing was alive in it. And we brought it back,” noted Bob Bauer, 69. “When I heard about it, I said, ‘I’ve got to keep that stream alive.’”

They have kept the dosers working through thick and thin. Last fall, a huge oak tree toppled in a windstorm, rupturing the cast iron diversion pipe and sending a geyser into the forest. It was quickly repaired.

The chapter persuaded Pennsy Supply

to donate the limestone rocks from its quarry and Sensenig Masonry to deliver it to the wells.

But everything else — feeding the limestone into the wells, clearing leaves from the diversion pipe intake and other tinkering — the volunteers do without fail.

It’s a social event as well as a work detail. Donuts and coffee served from the bed of a pickup or SUV are the reward after scooping limestone. Somehow, word of the weekly open-air coffee klatsch made it to a website used by through-hikers on the Appalachian Trail, which crosses the creek nearby. Hikers began showing up each week for the “Dunkin’ Donuts stop on the AT.”

Architect Joseph Connor, 52, one of the younger members of the crew, is focused on keeping the Stony Creek revival going.

“We joke about it being a science fair project, and it was,” he said. “At some point all of us won’t be here, but the wells probably will be. We have to get another generation involved. There are no manuals. It’s all shared knowledge.”

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